

6. The Social/Cultural Dimension of the Information Revolution

Moderator: Tora Bikson

Speaker: Jon Alterman

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The Presentation

This section of the conference was devoted to a discussion of the socio-cultural implications of the information revolution. The speaker hypothesized that the information revolution is likely to bring with it significant change and unrest, particularly within the developing areas which were his primary focal point. In particular, it was argued that technology tends to exacerbate differences within a society, while at the same time facilitating the mobilization of those who remain what he termed “non-info-centric.” The information revolution is likely to be significant for U.S. foreign policy-makers as political stability is certain to be exacerbated by the increasing salience of social conditions and problems. The challenge to national elites, as well as to U.S. policymakers, will be to manage the transition towards info-centric decision-making, given the concomitant social and cultural tensions that it is likely to create.

According to the speaker, one outgrowth of the information revolution is globalization. He identifies the core elements of globalization as:

- more information flowing with less obstruction
- information flowing independent of distance
- increasing opportunities for economic cooperation across borders
- greater opportunities to profit globally.

According to the speaker, there are two especially popular models of the implications of the information revolution. The first he termed the “Golden Straitjacket,” which has been popularized by Thomas Friedman, in which

economic development is regarded as a primary driver to socio-political change. This varies from a parallel perspective, popularized by Samuel Huntington, in which as a result of the “clash of civilizations,” culture, rather than economic development, is the primary driver to change. Rejecting both concepts as being somewhat too static, the speaker presented a third possibility in which he asserted that economic unrest can take cultural forms, and that an over-emphasis on Western consumerism, coupled with hostility towards Westernized elites, can exacerbate even further the cultural dimensions of this conflict.

In looking at the convergence of cultural and economic stimuli to unrest, outgrowths of the information revolution as understood by the speaker, he then shifted his attention to what he termed the globalization of information. Here he sees the following phenomena in play:

- the erosion of censorship
- people being inundated with vast quantities of information
- the democratization of information
- the empowerment of the individual through access to increased information.

In order to sustain these assertions, the author provided a number of examples, virtually all of which were from the Middle East. This emphasis on one region, at the expense of others, raised a number of questions in the ensuing discussion. These are dealt with below.

In an attempt to explore further the intertwining of cultural and economic forces as part of the information revolution, the speaker then turned his attention to what he termed the “globalization of style.” Here he talked about a variety of entertainment products, fashion and brand names, and so forth. The globalization of style tends to be largely an American inspired phenomenon making the U.S. a particularly salient target for political dissent and resentment. Such products as Coca Cola, Baywatch, Michael Jordan, and other commodities tend to be American in content and character, and the single biggest national purveyor of this globalization of style is clearly the United States, which may be challenged because of this.

The speaker emphasized the degree to which English-language literacy is synonymous with the globalization of information. This is the case not only in terms of hardware acquisition, installation, and repair, but also in the realm of software applications. The dominance of the English language in the global information revolution is accompanied by what he termed the bombardment of

Western images. He asserted that the prevalence of Western images is both tempting and frustrating, as it may create unattainable desires.

An additional element of the global information revolution is increased social stratification in which those most likely to participate most actively tend to have fluency in English, foreign ties, and high degrees of education. Thus, the speaker asserted that the information revolution is a phenomenon that is largely restricted to the political elite. He further asserted that only a limited group can afford to acquire high-tech devices, and that a relatively small group profits economically from the information revolution. Indeed, in some place the market for these tools is already saturated.

The result of this skewed global information revolution is further societal divisions, with a technologically savvy, highly educated, and IT conversant elite juxtaposed with a technologically unsophisticated, undereducated group of people which has been passed over by the information revolution. At the same time, the speaker noted that there is the spread of low-cost, low-tech devices, such as photocopiers, telephones, fax, videotapes, and the like, which both facilitate communication and are more broadly inclusive. It is his view that the growth of such technology facilitates mobilization for political dissent, both within borders and across them. He further noted that unless states continue to rely on a strong state model, their sovereignty will erode in large part due to facilitated trans-border as well as internal communications which are beyond the control of the state. The consequences of this within societies are:

- greater awareness of prosperity elsewhere and poverty at home
- desires among some for greater “cultural authenticity”
- a growing gap between rich and poor
- empowerment of individuals vis-à-vis their governments
- gradual adaptation to a surplus of information.

The speaker concluded his presentation by talking about how the globalization of information exacerbates societal cleavages and is likely to destabilize some governments. He further noted that it aids trans-national movements, creates new sources of authority, and widens socio-political gaps. If current trends persist, we can expect to see more political movements using IT as an element of political dissent, a flattening curve of IT growth, a growing hostility toward political elites in a number of settings, and increasing alienation in a number of sectors.

The speaker concluded by recommending that human capacity in key countries be fostered as the benefits of the information revolution must be distributed more equitably. He also asserted that we must understand neo-traditionalist movements as modern, not regressive. The case he clearly had in mind here were Islamic groups, which are regarded in the West as being backward-looking, when in fact he believes they are forward-looking. As a foreign policy consideration, the United States and its allies must be prepared for instability as certain regimes friendly to the U.S. are likely to become collateral victims to an information revolution, which he regards as having a significant ability to destabilize.

The Discussion

In the general discussion that followed these remarks, a number of participants took issue with several of the speaker's assertions.

- One participant argued that the presentation's emphasis on the negative and destructive aspects of the information revolution was simply inaccurate. The speaker was challenged to provide examples beyond the Middle East; another participant responded with examples from South America.
- Another participant suggested that IT penetration outside the Middle East is on a far greater scale, and is not restricted exclusively to elites.²¹ She also challenged the presenter's assertion that the information revolution was primarily an English-language phenomenon, and that, indeed, throughout Asia, materials in local languages are available for the operation of computers, software, and the like..
- Another participant took issue with the notion that those being excluded from the information revolution wish to opt out of it. He suggested that the have-nots are as eager to be embraced by the information revolution as are those at its core. He cited examples from under-developed countries and elsewhere.
- Another speaker from the floor suggested that we must be careful in discussing the role of "language." Linguistic problems and uses differ significantly from hardware, to email, to web pages, to user manuals, and so forth. Thus, different sectors offer different linguistic challenges.

²¹ Another participant, however, suggested Africa may resemble the Middle East in low IT penetration rates.

- It was suggested that much of what the speaker said seemed to focus primarily on the Internet, without paying adequate attention to satellite television, telephony, and the like.
- On speaker noted with approval that the presentation highlighted the difficulties in generalizing across cultures.
- This assertion was challenged by another participant, who talked about the efforts of a global financial institution which found striking consistencies amongst customers worldwide, and that cultural differences in some areas at least may be far less significant than one might think.
- Another speaker talked about the role of “good information” and “bad information” and suggested that just as economic markets allow for the survival of some things and the demise of others, that good information will prevail while bad information will disappear.

The discussion concluded with a general recognition that generalizations about the cultural and social dimensions of the information revolution are exceedingly difficult to formulate. While there are certain universalities which were identified, there are also regional and national peculiarities which are not always that easy to ascertain. The information revolution will continue to be driven by a complex intermingling of political, social, cultural, and economic factors. It is by understanding the intermingling of these factors that we can begin to understand and anticipate the future of the information revolution.